

# Stereotypes and Reality

Working relationships between Muslim men and Western women

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The value of female advisors is becoming more significant as operations continue in Iraq and Afghanistan. “The Army led the way with all-female squads less than a year after the start of the Iraq War with *Team Lioness*, a group of some 20 women.”<sup>1</sup> The Marines quickly followed suit and inserted *Female Engagement Teams (FETs)* in Afghanistan in February 2008.<sup>2</sup> Both Iraqis and Afghans responded well. According to a former *Washington Post* military correspondent, “Female [advisors] are extended the respect shown to men, but granted the access reserved for women...in other words, the culture is more flexible than we’ve conditioned ourselves to think.”<sup>3</sup> Smaller teams consisting of three female Marines and a female interpreter, “Iraqi Women’s Engagement Teams (IWETs),” go door to door in Iraq to determine what issues are significant to the women of the country. Author Thomas Ricks for *Foreign Policy* comments, “The main barrier to more intensive and extensive use of the [female] teams seems to be the inflexibility not of Afghan men but of U.S. Marine and Army officers.”<sup>4</sup>

Literature on this revolutionary way of approaching operations in Muslim cultures is limited. The teams mentioned above involve Western women working with Muslim women. Only a few documents discuss how Muslim males generally treat Western females. In October 2009, the Joint Center for International Security Force Assistance at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas published the *Female Advisor Primer*. Although the primer is not considered doctrine, it does provide useful information for future female advisors such as understanding the importance of the female role (both real and perceived) in a foreign culture.<sup>5</sup> The primer suggests that in order to be effective with a foreign nation’s military, “a female advisor must first understand the role of women in U.S. society and our military. She must then understand her role as an advisor—how to build rapport, trust and understanding, and finally, she must possess a keen appreciation of the role of women in the [host nation] culture.”<sup>6</sup> Other literature, such as Metrinko’s *The*

*American Military Advisor*, is extremely outdated when discussing gender roles. He writes, “A female of any high rank may be a paragon of military ability and experience. In foreign eyes, however, they face great initial obstacles, and have a serious disadvantage compared to an older male officer...”<sup>7</sup> According to Marija Gimbuta, author of *The Myth of Universal Patriarchy*, “the doctrine of universal sexual asymmetry (interpreted as inequality) has achieved the status of theoretical as well as political hegemony in Western thought.”<sup>8</sup> This lack of literature forces cross-cultural deployment training to rely on pre-conceived notions which assume male Muslim standards of behavior will not differ when dealing with either Muslim or Western women.

While my intention is not to establish a grand narrative of how all Muslim men will treat Western women, I seek to examine the relationships between Iraqi males and Western females based on four short anecdotes. The following accounts involve U.S. Air Force female officers working as Air Advisors to the Iraqi Air Force (IqAF). Each woman was in her 30's, in the rank of Captain or Major, and was on a 365-day deployment to Iraq under the Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I), Coalition Air Force Transition Team (CAFTT). Each attended pre-deployment/cultural awareness training where they were taught that Iraqis treat women with little respect, do not value their opinions, and to expect very different treatment than their male counterparts. Based on this training, each woman anticipated a challenging deployment while trying to “advise.”

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*Marhaba....Ismi Kacey.* (Hello, my name is Kacey). I am currently an Air Advisor to Iraqi Helicopter Squadron 4 in Taji, Iraq, where I instruct Iraqi pilots (Lt thru Col) on the Mi-17 helicopter. I was scheduled to fly with a Lieutenant and a Lieutenant Colonel during Ramadan, so



take-off was pushed back to allow them time to break their fasting after sunset. When my Lieutenant student pilot showed up 15 minutes late, I asked him why. He blamed his tardiness on the life support technician not being available. The Lieutenant Colonel was asked the same question after showing up 20 minutes late. He answered that he was sorry, they had lost track of time, and had been eating dinner. I had just caught the Lieutenant in a lie. Coincidentally, the Iraqi Squadron Commander arrived at this point to see the flight off and I informed him that I would be grounding the Lieutenant that night since I could not trust him. When I informed the Lieutenant of this, he was crushed. In similar situations between American male pilots and Iraqis, the result was usually angry words and confrontation. When I got stern with the Iraqis however, it was received very differently. The entire squadron was apologetic about the Lieutenant for days afterward and it was quite difficult to actually move beyond the incident since they were so disturbed about “my feelings being angry.” While there is still a level of concern and a wish not to offend or anger my male counterparts, it’s not nearly as extensive and the apologies don’t last nearly as long when I’m involved.

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*Marhaba....Ismi Denise.* (Hello, my name is Denise.) I was stationed in Baghdad to be the Personnel Advisor to the Iraqi Air Force A-1, a 2-star General and his staff. A deadline was set for each IqAF Air Staff directorate to have their personnel prioritizations turned in to the A-1. A General officer director (from a different division than mine) refused to give his list to his male USAF advisor—"only to Denise." The director wanted to personally give his response to me, out of both trust and respect.



As anyone who has worked with the Iraqis knows, they are very gracious hosts. I was invited to more lunches and sit-downs for chai tea than I can count. What was particularly interesting about these meetings was, despite the Iraqi female secretaries who had to sit in other rooms to separate themselves from the men, I was always invited into the male offices. More times than I can recall, my Iraqi hosts would grab food from the table with their hands and place it on my plate. They wanted to ensure I was getting "the best" food of that meal. Once I built a strong rapport with the Iraqis, I remember commenting, "Every Advisor should be a woman."

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*Marhaba....Ismi Valerie.* (Hello, my name is Valerie.) I was stationed in Baghdad Iraq as the A-6 Advisor to the Iraqi Air Force, working with a 2-star General and his staff. We worked together to set up their computer networks at their various



bases. One particularly difficult part of this task was ensuring the safe transportation and distribution of computer equipment around the country. We were finally able to get permission to work with the Iraqi Helicopter Squadron 4 and use helicopters to move 100 computers (300 boxes). On the day of pickup, I arrived at Taji National Depot with my senior computer engineer, an IqAF Colonel. When we arrived, we found out that the IqAF cadets who were supposed to help us load the equipment were sent home that morning. It was now up to the two of us to verify each serial number and load all 300 boxes by early afternoon when the helipad had another landing scheduled. With the unappealing thought of manual labor, the Colonel starting making phone calls to get help. No one was available. I had three boxes moved from the truck to the helicopter when the Colonel finally realized he wasn't going to get any help. It was too shameful for him to sit there while I did all the work, so he started loading boxes. We got the boxes loaded and the Colonel even ended up getting a pay raise for his additional efforts and commitment to the mission.

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*Marhaba....Ismi Anne-Marie. (Hello, my name is Anne-Marie.)* I was stationed in Taji, Iraq as the Air Advisor to the IqAF Helicopter Squadron 2. As a flight commander, I was directly responsible for instructing and evaluating the squadron pilots as well as advising



the squadron commander and director of operations on day-to-day activities. One particular flight with a student Lieutenant Colonel had not gone very well and I flew the rest of the sortie back to base for safety. When we landed, I spoke with him privately and told him how disappointed I was. He was so upset he started to cry and vowed to never disappoint me again. The next time we flew, a make-up sortie for the one he had failed, he went above-and-beyond what was required to show how much he had prepared. He also continuously asked if I was happy with each maneuver he performed. Although his flying skills still needed a lot of work, his new attitude put him on track to complete the course. After this experience, I had to be careful in giving feedback to the IqAF pilots. I reserved “being disappointed” in them for extremely serious scenarios.

Each of these experiences involving Iraqi males differs from expected behaviors. Although these are only small snapshots, this behavior was consistently exhibited by the men of the IqAF throughout each woman's deployment. Were these isolated experiences or do they represent the norm? In all four scenarios, each woman felt the Iraqi male did not want to disappoint her and she was able to accomplish more individually than her male counterparts collectively throughout the year. Are these examples merely exceptions to the rule for Muslim men, or are there actual double standards when it comes to their relationships with Muslim and Western women? Perhaps our notions of how Muslim men treat women are incorrect.

With leadership changes and evolving interpretations of women's roles in the Quran in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the responsibility of women in these countries is also shifting. In November 2009, the first all-female class of Police officers graduated from the Baghdad Police College.<sup>9</sup> This is viewed as a step forward for the women of Iraq. The head of the Police Institute, Colonel Sabah, showcased the all female class and talked about the importance of females working cases. "Because of the culture here in Iraq, we need female police commissioners to help work cases...if a child is involved as a witness to a crime, they tend to ease up more around females."<sup>10</sup> A Russian report on 4 April 2010 by the *RIA Novosti* News stated that women are to be invited to join the Afghan army. According to an Afghanistan Defense Ministry spokesperson, "women between 18-35 years old, with at least 9 years of school education, will serve in military hospitals and combat service support units after training courses lasting up to six months."<sup>11</sup> He also said the "total number of women serving in the army would reach 171,000 in two years, or 10% of the army's total personnel."<sup>12</sup>

More research is required to help future female advisors understand their role when deploying to the Middle East. Cultural awareness is paramount whether dealing with Muslim

women or men. As the roles of Muslim women continue to change, so will Muslim interactions with Western women.

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<sup>1</sup> Lunen, “Female Engagement Teams,” pg 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> [http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/09/women\\_in\\_coint\\_ii\\_how\\_to\\_do\\_it\\_right/](http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/09/women_in_coint_ii_how_to_do_it_right/).

<sup>5</sup> Austin, “Female Advisor Primer,” pg 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg 1.

<sup>7</sup> Metrinko, “The American Military Advisor,” pg 3.

<sup>8</sup> Gimbuta, “The Myth of Universal Patriarchy,” pg 3.

<sup>9</sup> Owen, Bob, “Rigorous Curriculum Challenges Baghdad Police College Students”, pg 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <http://en.rian.ru/world/20100204/157770656.html/>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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